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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the New Educator Orientation Project at Leland Middle School, North Carolina. Created by a collaboration between school faculty and faculty from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, this inquiry project was intended to develop an interactive orientation manual and accompanying CD-ROM for new faculty joining the teaching team that would support their membership in the existing community of learners. The purpose of this collaboration was to create a more systemic, site-specific approach that would support new teachers in ways that would positively influence their attitudes and beliefs about teaching, their role as educators, and their place in a learning community. An inquiry project was conducted to examine all faculty members' perceptions and develop a dynamic orientation plan. A hard copy manual was produced that provided numerous types of technical and procedural supports (e.g., faculty and staff listings, teacher use items, central office information, and technology information). A CD-ROM was also developed to provide information on teachers. There was an orientation breakfast for new and experienced teachers to familiarize new teachers with the school facility and personnel. Feedback indicated that the manual and CD-ROM were very helpful to both new and experienced teachers. (SM)

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Supporting Teachers in a Growing Learning Community: The New Educator Orientation Project at Leland Middle School

Nancy Hoffman

2003

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Supporting New Teachers in a Growing Learning Community: The New Educator Orientation Project at Leland Middle School

Introduction

Teacher retention is one of the most important issues facing educational leaders. Indeed, the need to support new teachers during their first years in the classroom is a critical challenge; particularly at a time when as many as 50% of the teachers leave the profession within the first three to five years. School-based solutions that bring the current faculty together to reckon with the multiple issues facing new teachers are one underused way to address this growing problem. At Leland Middle School (LMS), four teachers collaborated with a university faculty member from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington to develop the New Educator Orientation Project, a school-based research effort that focused on identifying and addressing the needs of new teachers joining the learning community at the public middle school. The goal of The New Educator Orientation Project was to develop an interactive orientation manual and accompanying CD-ROM for new faculty joining the teaching team that would support their membership in the existing community of learners. The purpose of this collaboration was to create a more systemic, site-specific approach that would support new teachers in ways that would positively influence their attitudes and beliefs about teaching, their role as an educator, and their place as a member in a learning community.

Conceptual Links

The New Educator Orientation Project was developed to address the needs of new teachers while simultaneously developing a community of learners within the school.

Sergiovanni (1997), Lieberman & Miller (1999), Etzioni (1991) and others refer to the need for schools to become environments that are based upon a theory of community wherein educators assume the role of "teacher-as-researcher" and "knowledge producer." Moreover, Costa & Garmston (1994) emphasize the importance of interdependence as teachers refine of their craftsmanship and increase their sense of efficacy and level of consciousness as autonomous individuals who are part of a larger, cohesive community. Teaching, when viewed from this perspective, is an intellectual craft practice and as such, entails that teachers inquire into their practices and make data-driven decisions to refine and improve their instructional practices. As a result, professional development occurs when teachers, novice and experienced alike, have the opportunity to inquire into their practices and learn with and from colleagues.

Studies of schools have identified core components of community as being "a system of shared values; rituals, activities, and symbols that signify membership in the school; and a pattern of social relationships that communicate an ethic of caring" (Byrk & Driscoll, 1998, cited in Sergiovanni, p. 116). Collaboration, responsibility-taking, and conflict resolution are important parts of any learning community (Heifetz, 1994). The roles of members of the community, therefore, are to attend to individual needs while simultaneously carrying out their responsibilities by working toward shared purposes and goals that ultimately serve the well being of the school or university. Stewardship, when enacted this way is the shared, moral obligation of each individual in the community (Goodlad, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1997) and entails overseeing the well-being of the members and critically reflecting as a way of growing in self-awareness. Empowerment in learning communities comes about as a product of enabling situations that help

members of the learning community to "see themselves and see what they have to do" (Starratt, 1994, p. 148). As a result, the hierarchy that typically exists between schools and universities, between administration and teachers, between experienced and beginning teachers has the potential to be flattened as all participants in the learning community contribute in the learning process. Moreover, new teachers are more apt to feel a greater sense of belonging, self-worth, and commitment to the organization when seen as a valued member in the learning community.

The New Educator Orientation Project

School Setting

At the time that this inquiry project began in the spring of 2002, Leland Middle School (LMS) had 21 teachers who had been employed at the school for less than three years. Of these teachers, four were in their first year of teaching. Several vacancies and job changes occurred at the beginning of the 2002-03 academic year, including the introduction of eight new faculty members in July; one new teacher in September; and two new teachers in November and December. Additionally, there are eight returning second year teachers, a new guidance counselor, nurse, and assistant principal.

Teacher attrition is not only an issue of this individual school, however. In Brunswick County, North Carolina there were 65 first year teachers; 38 second year teachers; and 34 third year teachers employed during the 2001-02 academic year. Nationally, it is estimated that nearly 2.4 million teachers will be needed in the next eleven years (Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000).

Inquiry Process

The shifting dynamics of school faculty is the primary problem that this research addressed. Focusing on the needs of new teachers who joined the teaching team at LMS, teachers developed a dynamic orientation plan was created to support and nurture individuals, improve self-esteem of teachers, increase teacher productivity, provide more consistency, stream-line school procedures, and ultimately improve the teacher retention rate at LMS. To reach this end, teachers conducted an inquiry project that included all faculty members' perceptions. Teachers sought to attain a whole school perspective by administering surveys to all faculty members to elicit ideas for the orientation project and determine how they felt that the existing mentoring program could be supported. Teachers who were new to LMS were separately surveyed to determine their perception of the needs of new teachers. Mentor teachers were also asked to consider their past and present experiences with beginning teachers and to share their impressions and suggestions. Finally, after all the surveys were collected and analyzed, the table of contents for an orientation manual was drafted and circulated among faculty as a means of reviewing the findings and to check for clarification and accuracy in the interpretations. Furthermore, members of a focus group who offered suggestions for improvement and clarity checked each draft of the complete orientation manual. The primary charge of this focus group was to answer the central question: Does the orientation manual reflect the needs and culture of the learning community at Leland Middle School?

Outcomes of the Inquiry Process

A hard copy manual was produced that provided numerous types of technical and procedural support including: a complete listing of all faculty, staff, and supporting resource personnel; all committees and the faculty representatives for each; the types of administrative and other support available; school programs; teacher use items; central office information; tips and insights from experienced teachers on issues such as classroom management; and technology information. In addition to the technical information, substantive support that would assist the new teachers in a smoother transition to the learning community at LMS as well as into the professional educational community was added to the manual. For example, information about attending conferences, joining professional organizations, and opportunities for becoming part of on going curriculum projects at LMS are included. Additionally, Diana Mintz, school principal, emphasized the importance of substantive, collegial support at LMS in her welcome letter to new teachers stating:

> You have joined a family of professionals who know the importance of teamwork and sharing responsibilities. Everyone feels responsible for the success or failure of each student. Everyone also feels responsible for helping his or her coworkers when needed. There is strength in numbers and when we work together it makes us all strong. No on is allowed to stand alone and fail. You will be provided with all of the help, resources, and positive advice you need to be successful.

To help new faculty begin to put a name with a face, find fellow co-workers who might share similar interests, and begin to know their way around the school facility, a multi-media CD-ROM was also developed. This product included a breakdown of the building with an interactive map, a dossier of all faculty including photographs and

personal and professional information for each person, and a PDF version of the hardcopy manual.

As faculty changes occur and procedural information needs to be updated, both the manual and CD-ROM are designed to easily adjust to the shifting dynamics. In fact, the design revolved around the knowledge that changes are inevitable and in fact, necessary to any learning community and so space for suggestions, reflections, and possible revisions are included. It is hoped that the faculty, new and experienced alike, find that the products are tools that can provide the necessary information, opportunities for collegial support, and sense of cohesiveness in a rapidly changing profession.

In addition to the manual and CD-ROM, the New Educator Orientation Project also included an orientation breakfast for all new and experienced faculty and a scavenger hunt for new teachers to help familiar them with the school facility and personnel. An orientation committee subsequently was formed so that teachers can continue to focus on the needs of new teachers and to revise the products as needed.

Findings

Initial feedback obtained through surveys has indicated that the manual and CD-ROM are very helpful to new and experienced teachers alike. Their comments include an emphasis on the increased sense of efficacy, belonging, and understanding of the norms and expectations at Leland Middle School. For example, Cindy, a sixth grade teacher commented that the manual was very thorough. "[It] should be a huge asset to all new and experienced teachers at LMS." Dianne, a second year teacher remarked that the manual was very well organized, making her work easier. "I love Section Seven: Tips

and Tricks! Great information!" Likewise Kathy, a veteran teacher, said, "If I had been given this when I was hired, my anxiety level would have been significantly lower." Gwen, the newest faculty member who joined the staff liked the way the sections were divided and found it easy to find the needed information.

> I liked all the information, but especially the forms. I am going to use the behavior form, the book form, and the writing form in my plans. This was great for a new teacher. I think you covered anything I could possibly have wanted to know. Great reference. Thanks for all your hard work.

The comments and feedback suggest that the project has successfully developed a means for informing teachers of the technical and procedural information necessary to do their job well and has provided an arena for teachers to join together as colleagues in a living and learning community of professionals. However, further research related to this project would be helpful such as: a comparison of the specific needs of new teachers at LMS with a larger sample of new teachers at other school sites; a longitudinal study of the teacher retention rate at LMS (to add to the initial feedback and provide data needed to reflect on the project and make staffing decisions); and a study focused on the impact that collaborative school-based research has on the professional development of educators.

Concluding Thoughts

The thinking behind this project addresses the moral dimension of teaching and the role of teachers as stewards within their own professional practice and as members of a larger educational community. The issues of teacher retention and meaningful professional development continue to be critically important to the profession; this study

suggests that opportunities for professional growth and collegiality are essential to the rapidly changing dynamics in schools. Specifically, the needs of teachers as lifelong learners and as members of learning communities are significant issues to address in the field of instructional supervision. According to Brown (1994) we need learning communities within which:

> [L]earning and teaching heavily depend upon creating, sustaining, and expanding a community of research practice. [Where] members of the community are critically dependent on each other.... collaborative learning is not just nice but necessary for survival. This interdependence promotes an atmosphere of joint responsibility, mutual respect, and a sense of personal and group identity. (cited in Sergiovanni, 1997, p. 140)

The New Educator Orientation Project sought ways to provide empowering conditions for new teachers to recognize their expertise and provide opportunities for them to work through conflicts, obstacles, and dilemmas with the support of experienced teachers within the learning community. The lessons learned from this research endeavor provide insight into the specific needs of learners within the context studied and contribute to a deeper understanding of what new teachers need to remain committed and engaged in the teaching profession.

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